

When Indira Gandhi decided to storm the Golden Temple

Civil servant BD Pande's memoir, *In The Service of Free India*, offers an insider's account of some of Indian politics' defining moment, including Emergency and the events leading up to Operation Blue Star

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The Indian Express

December 26, 2021



History of Punjab, history of Sikhs, Hindu- Sikh relations and the events leading up to and including Operation Bluestar at the Golden Temple on June 5 and 6, 1984, take up a third of the volume of civil servant BD Pande's memoir 'In the Service of Free India'. (Express photograph by Swadesh Talwar)

Bhairab Datt Pande, known to his generation as B.D., served in the Indian Civil Service from 1939 to 1977. His memoirs, written largely by hand, in 1986, two years after he demitted his last government assignment, carried his instructions that they should not be published before 1st January, 2001 or five years after his death, whichever was later. B.D. Pande died in 2009. His daughter Ratna Sudarshan has painstakingly edited and published the memoirs in 2021. The reader and present and future generations must be grateful to her for making available within the covers of a book an insider's perceptive account of economic and political developments in India in her first four decades after independence.

By extraordinary happenstance, B.D. was in the midst of the maelstrom of the fraught years of the Emergency and the period leading to the storming of the Golden Temple.

A shy boy who had felt lonely in his early years in school in Almora was taken away for studies to Allahabad by his father who resigned his government job in the postal department to be with his son. B.D. 's brief comment later, "his sacrifices for my welfare cannot be put in a few words", encapsulates the bonds between father and son. After a fine academic record in school and university, B.D. was sent by his father to study in Cambridge to appear for the entrance examination to the Indian Civil Service. In 1939 B.D. Pande signed the covenant inducting him into the ICS and was allotted Bihar as his cadre.

Pande's 20 years in Bihar saw him in multiple administrative posts in the districts and in Patna, often dealing with food scarcity and development issues. An exposure to tribals in Jharkhand left a deep impression about the cleanliness and the honesty of the people. He notes the resentment against the exploitation by outsiders and comments, "this undercurrent of hostility remains to this day and is at the bottom of the uprisings in the northeastern part of India". He is witness to the Bihar communal riots of 1946 in Hindu retaliation for the Great Calcutta Killings of 1945 and the Noakhali riots which "practically made Pakistan a certainty". Recalling in this context the attacks on Sikhs in northern India in the 80s, he is dismayed at how minorities are attacked and feel threatened. "I have never understood why 85% of the population of India, namely the Hindus, should feel threatened by several communities which themselves constitute less than 15% of the population...the greatness of Hinduism and the reason for its survival is its catholicity, its large heartedness in religious matters, its recognition of all faiths and the unity of mankind and Godhead".



In the **SERVICE** of **FREE INDIA**



Memoir of a Civil Servant

'B.D. Pande is respected not just for his skills as an administrator, but because he knew the difference between loyalty and sycophancy, between allegiance and flattery.'

—Gopalkrishna Gandhi

IN THE SERVICE of FREE INDIA : Memoir of a Civil Servant; By BD Pande; SPEAKING TIGER BOOKS; 320 pages; Rs 699 (Source: Amazon.in)

In Delhi, B.D. held charge of several departments and his wry account gives outsiders a glimpse of the whimsical nature of postings and transfers in government. One Cabinet Secretary tells him, he is not classified as a 'high flyer' as some others but " a high, above average officer, solid, unruffled but with little brilliance".

With these qualities, and though not the seniormost, B.D Pande was appointed Cabinet Secretary in October 1972 as there are concerns about inflation and increasing industrial unrest. But perhaps the most important issue was decline in political rectitude and resentment against Sanjay Gandhi's growing influence. As the author recalls, "... Democratic norms were being thrown overboard. Resistance was met with an array of criminal charges. Office bearers at all levels were nominated from the top. Corruption and unethical practices were increasing manifold".

Even as disaffection grew and political opposition was mobilized under the guidance of Jai Prakash Narayan, the Allahabad High Court judgment of June 11, 1975, disqualifying Indira Gandhi from parliament precipitated matters. B. D. was present when an internal Emergency was declared early on June 26, the Cabinet only informed after Presidential assent. In the months that followed " actions were not taken through the official machinery or official channels", and were unknown to the Cabinet Secretariat or even the PMO as orders were issued directly by Sanjay Gandhi. Ironically, following Congress defeat in the elections in March, 1977, B. D. Pande also attended the Cabinet meeting withdrawing the Emergency and obtained the signature of the Acting President, B. D. Jatti in the early hours. In the author's view, ordering the elections "was the greatest decision she took which helped in strengthening of the Indian Constitution and India's nascent democracy".

B. D. Pande was recalled from retirement to assume the governorship of West Bengal in September, 1982, to be moved to Punjab when President's rule was declared there in October, 1983.

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The author's scholarship is evident as are his meticulous accounts of the series of events and meetings that led to the assault on the Golden Temple by the Indian army to flush out terrorists.

He may not have been a participant in the decisions taken by the coterie around the prime minister and his advice consistently ignored, but as governor he had a ringside view. B. D. Pande lays out for us step by step, date by date, the centre's thwarting all efforts to find a political solution to the issues confronting Punjab. It is a sorry tale of the pursuit of party interests with utter disregard for the national and, in the author's judgement, Indira Gandhi was unwilling to come to a political solution which might be to the detriment of the Congress. Perhaps her mind was already made up for she stressed to the newly appointed governor "her determination to stamp out these terrorists... she added that she would not hesitate to bomb the Golden Temple if she had to", leaving B.D. spellbound.

The author's recall of the events of those times confirms the depiction in G. B. S. Sidhu's "The Khalistan Conspiracy" published recently and would be invaluable for current and future historians.

If Indira Gandhi paid a heavy price for her misjudgement, the nation, Sikhs in particular, have paid a heavier one. Unfortunately, the fecklessness which characterized the political leadership at the time is still in evidence, as we see in references to farmers agitating against farm laws as Khalistanis and terrorists and attempts to drive a communal wedge between Hindu and Sikh farmers.

One must agree with the editor that these memoirs "bring out some of the challenges that faced civil servants, and the commitment with which these were resolved, in the years following Independence".

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